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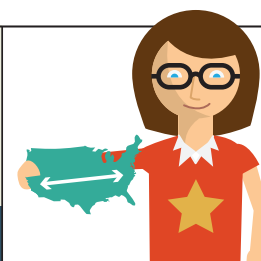## HOW PRINCIPALS USE MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

MICHELLE MCVICKER'S EXPERIENCE

FACT FILE FOR BUENA VISTA ELEMENTARY

Buena Vista Enhanced Option Elementary School, in the Innovation Zone of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) district, has about 330 students in pre-K through fourth grade.

★ 98 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

★ 97 percent of its students are African-American.

★ The school has consistently had a very high transience rate of around 70 percent and higher (the percent of its students who will attend more than one school in a year).

★ Before Michelle McVicker became principal, Buena Vista received the lowest state accountability rating possible for proficiency in both reading and math.

★ In 2013–14, the first year using Multi-Classroom Leadership, the school made tremendous strides, receiving the highest growth score of 5 on the state system. At that point, 19 percent of its students tested as proficient in math, and 16 percent in English language arts (ELA).

★ By 2014–15, it had 28.3 percent of its students proficient or above in math, and 19.6 percent proficient or above in ELA.

★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at Buena Vista: $12,454

★ *Note: Since this was published, independent research in 2018 indicated that multi-classroom leaders leading small teaching teams produce strong learning gains for students. Click here for details.*

Sources: Student demographics from http://nashvilleschoolfinder.org/school/buena-vista-elementary-enhanced-option/; transience rate from Michelle McVicker; student results from https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/report-card

"You can't lead learners without being a learner yourself," says Tennessee Principal Michelle McVicker. And when it comes to leading a group of new teacher-leaders, McVicker had to learn how to guide them—fast.

In 2012, McVicker took her first position as a solo principal, coming to Metro Nashville Public Schools to turn around Buena Vista Enhanced Option Elementary, a school in the new "Innovation Zone" of very low-performing, high-poverty schools. With 16 percent of students proficient in math and only 7 percent in language arts, and an extremely transient student population, Buena Vista presented McVicker with major challenges for her students and teachers.

After five years of experience as an assistant principal and co-principal, seven years as a teacher, and seven years as a public TV outreach manager, McVicker was not new to leadership. But she learned about a completely new approach to developing and organizing school staff, and she decided to guide Buena Vista in that direction: adopting an "Opportunity Culture" school model.

Using Multi-Classroom Leadership (see page 2), the school began with four multi-classroom leaders, or MCLs, with one covering two grades, then increased that to five when it became clear that kindergarten needed an MCL of its own. Each MCL led a grade-level "lead teacher" and an "aspiring teacher"—a paid, full-time, yearlong student teaching position.

McVicker knew her new MCLs were great teachers. What they needed from her, though, was to learn how to be great leaders as well. This was critical for changing instruction in every classroom —McVicker knew that one person could not be in all classrooms showing teachers a new way. After two years of guiding successful MCL teams at Buena Vista—and achieving student outcomes that beat the odds despite the high transience rate—she honed a short list of methods to lead her leaders.

In Opportunity Culture school models, a school extends the reach of its excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within its regular budget. At Buena Vista, a team of teachers and administrators chose to use the Multi-Classroom Leadership model, in which an excellent teacher can stay in the classroom while leading a small teaching team, co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them. The multi-classroom leader receives much higher pay while taking full accountability for the results of all students taught by his or her team.

CHOOSE WISELY: GREAT TEACHERS WHO CAN LEAD COLLABORATIVELY

First, McVicker says, a principal must select those instructional team leaders wisely.

"The people that I bring on board to what I call my inner circle—and that's what they are, trusted advisors, collaborators, and leaders for the place—there cannot be any dissension among them," McVicker says. "I'm not saying they can't challenge each other, but you must be singly aligned, and they must be completely loyal to the leader."

McVicker realized the need for that cohesion many years ago, during a district training session for professional learning community leaders. She overheard PLC leaders at the next table discussing their principal, with several leading the critique.

"Half of them didn't like their principal—and by the end of the training no one did, and they had decided to mutiny," she says.

A principal should select teachers to be multi-classroom leaders "because they're the best teachers out there, because you want people to replicate what they do. That's important, and then you have to teach them to lead. But they won't learn from you if they don't truly believe that you're the person to teach them, and if they are not aligned on the vision. If they have their own agenda, they'll tank you."

And then, "any school that's divided is going to fall … and in a turnaround school, you have no margin for error. You have to get it right, and you have to get it right, quick, and you have to move."

HOLD WEEKLY DATA MEETINGS WITH OBSERVATIONS

With a solid team of MCLs selected, McVicker geared up to provide them with extensive leadership training. She focused on two critical weekly MCL meetings, backed up with a system of feedback and support.

MICHELLE MCVICKER'S KEYS TO LEADING A TEAM OF LEADERS

★ **Choose wisely:** Select multi-classroom leaders (MCLs) who agree fully with your vision and plans for the school and who respect the principal—teacher-leaders to lead and develop teaching teams *and* the school.

★ **Hold weekly MCL data meetings and observations:** These weekly, highly structured, tightly led, and focused meetings first review data about progress in each teaching team. In the second half of these meetings, all MCLs, the assistant principal, and McVicker did "instructional rounds," observing one team's teachers, then discussing what they observed, leading to additional action steps for that teacher-leader.

★ **Hold weekly instructional team data meetings:** Buena Vista's MCLs hold weekly data meetings with their teams.

★ **Teach leadership:** One tight, highly structured book study weekly on leadership topics that incorporates practices and tools teachers should be using in their classrooms, including steps to develop others on the job.

★ **Create "feedback loops"** in which people at every level of leadership provide weekly, written feedback for those they lead, with immediate actions they should take. Additionally, MCLs should lead **weekly instructional team data meetings**. The feedback loops, MCL weekly data meetings and observations, and the weekly team data meetings all help create a cascade of leadership.

★ **Involve teacher-leaders in school decisions:** Expose teacher-leaders to other facets of school leadership so they understand the choices being made to reach the school's goals. Most important, bring them into discussions and decision-making about resource allocation.

The first of those weekly meetings came on Monday mornings—"the most important piece, where MCLs are held accountable for the reinforcement, refinement, and training of their team—the most critical, boots-on-the-ground thing they do." At the beginning of every week, the MCLs meet with McVicker and the assistant principal for an hour of intense reporting and discussions

about each team's data and progress, and an hour of "instructional rounds," in which everyone rotates through an MCL's classrooms, observing and returning to dissect what they saw, leaving the MCL with next steps for the team. McVicker had done these rounds previously with just an assistant principal, but knew expanding them to all MCLs would provide crucial feedback and conversations. The rounds plus the data focus mean more individualized instruction, with a focus on meeting each student's goals—easier in the team structure, with more adults watching and helping each child.

And the Monday meetings, McVicker says, get all the MCLs fully invested. Recalling one MCL who wasn't working as hard as needed, McVicker says the other MCLs "really challenged her, just by being next to her and doing a better job, using technology and data. Because they're all in the room together, they're completely exposed, and no one wants to be at the bottom of the barrel. I can't say that's something I planned, but it's how it worked out. In the old days, you wouldn't be afraid that others would know they were doing a better job than you."

TEACH LEADERSHIP

The second of the weekly MCL meetings were Friday morning book studies—"the chance to hash out academic topics that enhance their practice, and their chance to stretch each other." McVicker added an hour of professional learning time every Friday focused on a six- to eight-week book study, and intended as an interactive hour of exploring and problem-solving on one topic. McVicker structured these—down to the minute, so no moment is wasted—using the format and tools she expects teachers to use in class, with MCLs taking turns leading the studies. MCLs come out of these studies with organized plans to use what they've learned to change instructional practice throughout their teams.

How have the book studies helped? McVicker points to the study of *Crucial Conversations,* by Kenny Patterson and Joseph Grenny, which MCLs called one of the most important and life-changing studies they've had.

"One of the most critical changes for MCLs is how to have a hard conversation with somebody who's not doing the right thing, or who's not doing the right thing because they don't know better, or choose to continue even when they've been guided. That's a huge skill, and not something they're trained in," she says.

"That social-emotional conversational piece, to get adults to do what they don't want to do, is the hardest thing, particularly in turnarounds, because in turnarounds, you have to deliver or you have to go. We don't want anyone to go; we want to get them all on the right track and moving kids. I consider it a personal failure when I have to let someone go, and I need my MCLs to feel that same level of urgency and responsibility. They're no longer just my people, though they're always mine ... they need to belong to the MCLs as well."

One MCL, she says, is "the most nurturing, positive-belief person you'll ever meet, so he assumes everyone is fabulous ... but if you enmesh yourself in [your teachers'] lives and then have to have this conversation, it's really hard. He thought he was doing it right, but his teachers weren't getting it. His total process for how you give tough feedback has changed completely."

Those meetings bookending each week are the critical elements for a strong, well-developed leadership team, McVicker says. "Without that unfettered access and exchange with the person who's supposed to be growing them, it would be a 50-50 shot that that growth happens. We likely wouldn't be aligned without these meetings."

CREATE FEEDBACK LOOPS

Building on those, McVicker focuses on giving MCLs other feedback and daily interaction. Each week, MCLs turn in their schedules to her, so she can monitor their time use, and reinforce assignment and action plans for the teams. At the Monday meetings, they compare what MCLs say about how they're using their time to what McVicker has observed. "Initially, I found that they were seeing completely different things from what I was seeing, and sometimes choosing more surface areas than the deeper areas."

The "feedback loop" extends to everyone in the school. Lead teachers write feedback for their aspiring teachers; MCLs provide written feedback for both. McVicker's feedback is mostly verbal, not written, in the Monday meetings, but she also gives feedback for everyone in the building.

Additionally, each grade-level team holds a weekly data meeting, led by the MCL with help from the principal or assistant principal as needed.

INVOLVE TEACHER-LEADERS IN SCHOOL DECISIONS

McVicker also believes in pulling MCLs into areas of school management to which they may not have been exposed. In the summer, MCLs work with her on budget planning (she has autonomy over her budget). "I put them in that process with me, and even though I generally know where it's going, I wait to see if that's where they're going to wind up. The notion of the MCL is development—how well can I train them to see and hear and think about those things that are critically important to change instruction. How is that budgeting? The budget is about resources."

Like the Monday morning feedback, this planning "forces them to grow into the depth that's needed." MCLs also grasp the trade-offs being made to make their higher pay possible and sustainable. "I spend my money on people, not stuff [such as new books]. It's more important to keep people in the pipeline than it was to buy additional stuff, so we'll have to be creative about the stuff."

McVicker keeps a tight focus on that pipeline, determined to create a strong internal pipeline. "It really is about not only building the skills of the individual teacher for their teaching practice, but building them toward what the future holds for them."

That starts with the "aspiring teachers," who can then move up to become team teachers and, eventually, gain the skills to become an MCL. "The aspiring teacher model allows us to build teachers with the skills that they need to be successful here [in a high-poverty school] that will translate in any environment, and also allows us a year to watch them, and then we're able to keep the very best ones."

Reaping the Rewards

Training and leading a team of multi-classroom leaders this way, McVicker says, makes the hard work of turning around a school more feasible. Even though her school has had student transience as high as 73 percent in a year, her team has achieved high or expected student growth using this model.

"The whole reason we put MCLs in place was to give teachers a greater level of support, because as a single principal and instructional leader, I couldn't be shoulder to shoulder, coaching and mentoring at that level—there's just not enough of me. I've only

MCLs meet every Monday morning with McVicker and the assistant principal for an hour of intense reporting and discussions about each team's progress.

modeled two lessons in classrooms since then, because the MCLs can do it. I model with the MCLs far more often, but I'm not having to go into classrooms and teach."

Additionally, having strong feedback loops has made the formal evaluation process with teachers simpler and more successful, McVicker says, because they already know what to work on before she makes her observations.

More than anything, McVicker says, principals leading a team of MCLs need to model the actions they expect—continuing to be learners, too.

In her first year as a principal on her own, working with her school team to design their Opportunity Culture, she had to hone her skills. "As principal, I had to be devoted to my own learning as well, and not be afraid to say 'I don't have a clue, but I'll find out.' "

Watch: A short video accompanies this vignette series on Opportunity Culture principals, featuring Michelle McVicker, Alison Harris Welcher, and Christian Sawyer.

Learn More about Extending the Reach of Excellent Teachers and Creating an Opportunity Culture

FOR AN OVERVIEW:

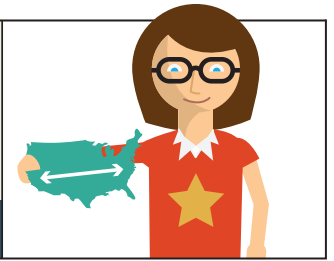**VISIT ☞** www.OpportunityCulture.org

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BUILDING AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE FOR AMERICA'S EDUCATORS

PUBLIC IMPACT

HOW PRINCIPALS USE MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

ALISON HARRIS WELCHER'S EXPERIENCE

FACT FILE FOR RANSON IB MIDDLE SCHOOL

Ranson IB Middle School, part of the Project L.I.F.T. (Leadership and Investment for Transformation) zone in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, has about 1,100 students in grades 6 through 8. Project L.I.F.T. is a public-private partnership to improve academics at historically low-performing, high-need schools in western Charlotte, N.C.

★ 84 percent of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

★ 68 percent of its students are African-American.

★ 22 percent of its students are Hispanic/Latino.

★ In 2012–13, after Alison Harris Welcher became principal but before Ranson began using Opportunity Culture models, 21 percent of the students scored proficient or above grade level in math, and 25 percent in reading.

★ In 2013–14, the first year using Multi-Classroom Leadership, Ranson made growth expectations, with 38 percent of its students testing as proficient or above in reading and 26 percent in math.

★ In 2014–15, Ranson's very high growth put it in the state's top 1 percent of growth. 51 percent of its students were now proficient in reading, and 44 percent in math.

★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at Ranson: $23,000

★ *Note: Since this was published, independent research in 2018 indicated that Multi-Classroom Leadership produces the strongest results, with MCLs leading small teaching teams. Other teaching roles such as blended learning achieve the best outcomes when used on an MCL's team. Click here for details.*

Sources: Student population and FRL statistics based on 2013–14 numbers, from http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/Documents/EDS%202013%2040th%20day%20sorted%20by%20school%20and%20EDS%20percentage.pdf; student population breakdown based on 2015–16 report, from http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/Documents/PMR%20Month%2001%20Enrollment%20by%20Race%202015.pdf; student outcomes from https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/snapshots/600514_2015_K-8-School.pdf

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In 2011–12 when Alison Harris Welcher became principal of Ranson IB Middle School, part of the Project L.I.F.T. zone within Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, she knew the school needed quick and deep culture change. In her first year, she succeeded in improving teacher and student attendance rates, student behavior, and teacher commitment to Ranson, which had long been a low-performing, high-poverty school, with high teacher turnover and difficulty filling all its teaching positions.

But she knew she needed something more to effect the major change necessary for her students to succeed academically.

From the moment she heard about Opportunity Culture school models, Welcher was sure this approach offered a solid new path, and could bring the complete culture change that was her focus as a leader.

Through many conversations in her first year with a core team of teachers and assistant principals at Ranson, Welcher says, "I just made it clear that we've got to do something to help our scholars catch up. They are already coming to us behind; it is no one's fault, but it is everyone's responsibility. … And it was decided from that core team that we're going to take some risks and make things happen."

In 2013–14, its first year implementing Opportunity Culture models, Ranson had just one multi-classroom leader (MCL) and two blended-learning teachers (BLTs) (see "Multi-Classroom Leadership," page 2). A decisive leader, Welcher quickly realized she needed to be more nimble and change the school much faster—one MCL and two BLTs were not enough.

"After some of the success that we saw, not only data but also anecdotal, we said, 'Why would we wait? Why would we not go ahead and do this work, do what's right for kids now?'" Welcher says. "If I waited for the five-year strategy, the current scholars [would miss out]."

MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

In Opportunity Culture school models, a school extends the reach of its excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within its regular budget. At Ranson, a team of teachers and administrators chose to use primarily the **Multi-Classroom Leadership** (MCL) model, in which an excellent teacher can stay in the classroom while leading a small teaching team, co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them. The multi-classroom leader receives much higher pay while taking full accountability for the results of all students taught by his or her team. Ranson also began using blended-learning teachers, who use a combination of online and in-person instruction to personalize learning, with guidance and support from an MCL.

So, in 2014–15, Welcher went schoolwide, with seven MCLs each leading a team of three to five teachers; three blended-learning teachers; and three reach associates, who are extra paraprofessionals supporting a teaching team—meaning Ranson had 100 percent of its students touched by Opportunity Culture in math, reading, and science.

With that jump to seven teacher-leaders, Welcher changed how she leads the MCLs. "I will tell you I am an instructional leader... but the reality of an urban middle school principal is you're also a manager, a culture builder, a counselor," she says.

Rather than trying to reach all of her teachers directly, Welcher shared that instructional leadership with her team of MCLs and assistant principals. Together, they catapulted the school into the state's top 1 percent of growth in one year.

This is the story of what Welcher changed to lead her team of leaders to such great success so fast, focusing on what she sees as the crucial elements in Ranson's early turnaround success.

CHOOSE WISELY

When Welcher went nearly schoolwide with Opportunity Culture models, she became aware that some teachers weren't open to the coaching an MCL gives.

"What changed was the way I hired people. I had to hire for coachability and also be very explicit about what this role will be, since it's unlike anything else—it's really hard to explain to someone coming from out of state that you have a teacher, who *is* a teacher, who's going to coach you and lead planning, but they're a

ALISON HARRIS WELCHER'S KEYS TO LEADING A TEAM OF LEADERS

★ **Choose wisely:** In a school with many newer teachers, Welcher increasingly looked for teacher-leaders who had the competencies to lead other adults, including the willingness and ability to direct and monitor them. She also looked for team teachers who were willing to be led.

★ **Teach leadership:** Welcher instituted weekly professional development meetings for the leadership team, tightly focused on the needs an MCL has in leading other adults.

★ **Put MCLs in charge of lesson plans:** MCLs create their teams' lesson plans, removing a burden from the teachers and ensuring consistent, high-quality instruction. With strong lesson plans in hand, team teachers could focus on lesson delivery and personalizing instruction.

★ **Schedule weekly team data time:** MCLs were expected to meet with their teams at least once a week for 90 minutes, guiding them through the lesson plans, adjusting the lessons based on data, and then role-playing difficult portions of a lesson.

★ **Hold quarterly "data days":** Quarterly schoolwide assessments were followed by a day of data analysis and carefully structured preparation for MCLs to meet the following week with their teams for a half day of powerful data meetings.

★ **Lead a cascade of leaders:** Welcher created a structure of support in which MCLs supported their teams while being supported by the assistant principals, who were supported by Welcher.

★ **Use two-way accountability:** Assistant principals were accountable to Welcher, and she to them. MCLs were responsible to their assistant principal and vice versa.

★ **Build an internal leadership pipeline:** Develop one or more leaders on the job, who could then go on to lead a whole school, and develop team teachers to become MCLs in future years.

teacher. Yes, you're a teacher and they're a teacher, but they have more responsibility. For some teachers, that is a beautiful thing, but for others, there were big questions about autonomy in their classrooms."

Additionally, as Welcher made MCLs the lead planners for their teams, creating lesson plans and assessments for all teachers, she had to ensure in the hiring process that teachers would work well under that level of direction.

Interviews were rigorous and long—so long that Ranson has worked to shorten them without losing the rigor—and MCLs needed to be a part of them, helping to provide feedback on each candidate. Interviews included having each candidate write a lesson plan, teach a bit of it, come out and be given feedback, and then return to the classroom, so the interviewers could assess how each candidate responded to feedback.

But, Welcher noted, even the most rigorous interviews won't fully weed out every candidate who may not fit into a culture like Ranson's. A new hire can say all the "right" things in the interview, but then prove unwilling to go along with lesson plans created by MCLs. Welcher found that no matter how much she communicated about the school's culture during the interview process, teachers new to Ranson still needed reminders of the school's culture and commitment to helping all students grow, fast.

TEACH LEADERSHIP

In selecting her MCLs, Welcher noticed that among the top candidates, nearly all lacked skills in monitoring, directiveness, and others related to leading adults. That led Welcher and her assistant principal, Erica Jordan-Thomas (who became principal at Ranson in summer 2015), to make long-term plans for weekly, two-hour professional development (PD) meetings of the "instructional leadership team" (MCLs, assistant principals, and Welcher) focused on adult leadership.

"They are truly PD—two hours of doing some type of PD like showing models of what a conversation looks like if it's directive," Welcher says, or detailing various monitoring strategies, sometimes at very basic levels—such as getting MCLs to think about whether they need a specific spreadsheet, or to put time in their schedules to check in with a teacher every day. Welcher's role was to help the MCLs come up with methods that suited each for developing their teams of teachers on the job.

"I can remember distinctly an MCL having trouble with teachers following through with tasks—this was something we'd put into the [MCLs'] interview process, like 'draft an email that [you] would send to a teacher who'd failed to submit lesson plans three days in a row.' We knew this would be a gap for her, so we coached that. We had this weekly PD, but she also had a coach, her assistant principal, as a one-on-one coach to support her, such as with draft-

ing these emails, and something as simple as cc-ing her assistant principal, and when it became necessary cc-ing me as the principal, which is just a technique when you're monitoring someone and directing them. They need to understand, 'this is important, I'm being monitored, I'm getting this benefit, and I need to monitor you.' "

Overall, Welcher saw her role as setting the parameters of her expectations, but giving the MCLs autonomy and time to make their leadership meet those expectations. "That was frustrating for some of the MCLs, because they just wanted to do it right the first time, but ... there's not one right way."

Welcher had to take the MCLs through the process of learning what combination of modeling, coaching, co-teaching, and planning worked for each one—"taking them through a change process and really saying 'how about we learn as we grow, because once you learn this critical piece from experience, you'll do it right from here on out, and you'll know the nuances of why you're doing it this way, not just because your principal told you so, but you'll deeply understand why you're doing it the way you're doing it.' "

PUT MCLS IN CHARGE OF LESSON PLANS

Welcher and her team of MCLs quickly realized that Ranson's teachers, many of whom had little experience, needed significant help with instructional planning. So the MCLs began to create their teams' lesson plans, removing a burden from the teachers and ensuring consistent, high-quality instruction. With strong lesson plans in hand, team teachers could focus on lesson delivery and personalizing instruction.

SCHEDULE WEEKLY TEAM DATA TIME, AND HOLD QUARTERLY "DATA DAYS"

MCLs were expected to meet with their teams at least once a week for 90 minutes, guiding them through the lesson plans, adjusting the lessons based on data, and then role-playing difficult portions of a lesson.

Welcher also created quarterly "data days" based on a proposal from one MCL, Ashley Jackson, after they saw that using regular co-planning time to discuss data was not enough. Early in the week before a data day, they would administer a schoolwide assessment. The MCLs, Welcher, and her assistant principals would then meet that Friday to hash through all the assessment's data, by subject area, using a protocol that prepared them for powerful data meetings with their teaching teams. On "data day" the next week, each MCL would meet for a half-day with his or her team to review the data and make instructional changes based on the results. The school covered the teachers' classes during those half-day meetings by using substitutes (paid for through Title I and professional development funds) who rotated through the classes.

LEAD A CASCADE OF LEADERS

Between the second and third years of implementation, Welcher made another shift for herself.

"I attempted to coach teachers myself and coach the MCLs as well, and it became clear that I could not go as deep as I needed to with all teachers or MCLs," she says. "So what changed in the last year was I coached the assistant principals, the assistant principals coached their two MCLs, and the two MCLs coached their teachers, so it was a nice cascade of support that allowed me as principal to keep my clear eye around all that was going on—I did not get tunnel vision."

For Welcher, that meant that when data came back, she and the assistant principals could see where they needed to focus their time. Then she could directly coach an assistant principal, observe the assistant principal coaching the MCL, and observe the MCL at her meetings with her team. "So my coaching was very tight," she says.

How did she see that help? One MCL had to deal with teacher turnover on her team. The tight coaching focus from Welcher for a team facing difficult pressures led the MCL to see the highest growth index of all Ranson MCLs.

USE TWO-WAY ACCOUNTABILITY

Welcher saw that with this new model of team leadership, she needed to create a clear structure showing who was responsible for whom. So she was accountable to the assistant principals, and they to her. The assistant principals were accountable to their MCLs, and vice versa.

"Ultimately, as principal I am responsible for what does or does not happen in this building, so if there's a breakdown somewhere, I'm going to go to that assistant principal and both trust they put something in place but I'm going to hold them accountable that it is executed in the way it should be. Figure out where the breakdown is—you'd be surprised, the breakdown is not always with the teacher, even though unfortunately that's where a lot of people put it."

BUILD AN INTERNAL LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

Welcher also focused by 2013–14, the first year implementing the new models, on creating an internal leadership pipeline, building then-Assistant Principal Erica Jordan-Thomas' skills in planning and leading the leadership team meetings.

The MCLs, Welcher, and her assistant principals meet for quarterly "data days" to hash through schoolwide assessment data.

"First we developed a strategic plan for the year based on the topics we thought we needed to cover based on the gaps we saw and what we were seeing throughout the year, then Erica would plan the agenda and slide deck, I would give her feedback by Thursday, and she'd be ready to execute it by Friday," Welcher says, "so that we had that cycle every single week." The meetings also used resources from Relay Graduate School of Education, books such as *21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, and their own experiences.

Additionally, Welcher started to consider how to prepare the MCLs' team teachers for leadership roles. She tells of one teacher in particular who wants to stay at Ranson only if he can continue to work with his MCL, whom the teacher has found exceptionally helpful in his early years of teaching. How can Ranson, instead, prepare that teacher to become an MCL—has the school done enough?

"What does it mean to intentionally prepare teachers to go into these roles? It's great that he's experienced it, but have we given him a try at coaching someone, or leading a data session?"

By supporting those who want to grow into a new role, Ranson can keep advanced roles filled to a large extent with an internal pipeline, she says.

"We can put ourselves in a really great position to have conversations by December so strategic things can happen from January to June, so we have little to no gap in the following year even if we lose an MCL," she says. At Ranson, the second generation of Opportunity Culture is on the verge of happening, she believes, and so she wants the school to have prepared enough rising stars to ensure there are no drops in instructional excellence if current leaders leave—as Welcher herself did, moving up to become director of school leadership for Project L.I.F.T., leading the assistant principals within the zone, making way for Erica Jordan-Thomas to become principal.

For Ranson, a major challenge for the team of MCLs will be maintaining momentum and enthusiasm.

"One of the biggest challenges is how to continue to raise the bar of rigor, not think 'good enough' yet," Welcher says. "Based on data, you look at us, and in the high-need-school world, Ranson looks pretty good [based on student growth]—but widen the lens a bit against high-affluence schools, and you can see the work we still need to do."

The principal must help MCLs see how much hard work it took to get here, then think about how hard everyone has to work to get to next level, Welcher says. When she and her MCLs saw some data at the end of the 2014–15 year, they were disappointed because they didn't hit all the goals they had set—until they saw the growth data that finally came out after the next school year began.

"It wasn't until they saw that growth data that they saw, 'oh wow, we actually did do something here—I think it worked!' But then the reaction was, 'that took a lot of hard work just to grow, we have to do a lot more hard work to grow and to move the proficiency rate.' That's what Erica's task really is—how do you take kids to the next level? We clearly know how to move kids, but how do we make sure that rigor stays high?"

It was that need to keep enthusiasm high that led Welcher to move on from Ranson despite her love for the school and staff.

"Erica is great for this, because she does some of this better than I did," Welcher says. "There is a season for turnaround principals... and I do think my skill set and passion was around taking a very complex and desperate situation to good, and Erica is poised to take them from good to great. Keep a clear and exciting vision, with a very dynamic personality—she has that, so she keeps it interesting and pushes people to the next level. That's what's going to keep MCLs excited and moving."

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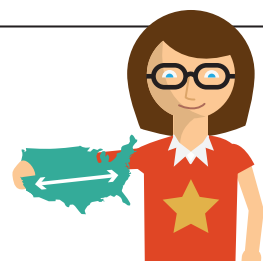
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BUILDING AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE FOR AMERICA'S EDUCATORS

PUBLIC IMPACT

HOW PRINCIPALS USE MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES
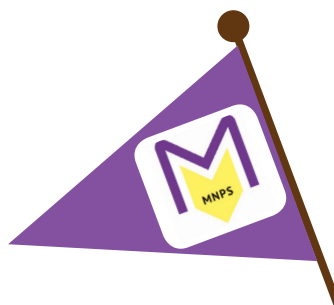
CHRISTIAN SAWYER'S EXPERIENCE

FACT FILE FOR BAILEY STEM MAGNET MIDDLE SCHOOL

Bailey STEM Magnet Middle School, in the Innovation Zone of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools district, has about 400 students in grades five through eight.

★ 92 percent of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in 2013–14.

★ 82 percent of its students are African-American; 12 percent are white, and 4 percent are Hispanic/ Latino.

★ In 2011–12, before Christian Sawyer became principal, Bailey received the lowest state accountability rating possible for both proficiency and growth in reading and math.

★ By 2014–15, after two years of using the Multi-Classroom Leadership model, Bailey received a ranking of 5 out of 5 for student growth on the state system, getting the highest level of growth in math in the district in grades three through eight.

★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at Bailey: $12,454

★ *Note: Since this was published, independent research in 2018 indicated that multi-classroom leaders leading small teaching teams produce strong learning gains for students. Click here for details.*

Sources: Student demographics from http://nashvilleschoolfinder.org/school/buena-vista-elementary-enhanced-option/; student results from https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/report-card

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When Christian Sawyer came to Bailey STEM Middle School in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2012, he didn't waste time in making major changes to turn the school around. The school was in dire straits: it was a very high-poverty school, with the lowest state accountability rating possible for both proficiency and growth in reading and math.

Sawyer learned about an Opportunity Culture, which appealed to him for its leadership possibilities that kept great teachers in the classroom.

"When I was a teacher, teaching was my passion, and I had some outstanding school leadership, who had a strong commitment themselves to teacher leadership," Sawyer says. "I felt compelled to seek out the principalship because there really wasn't anything else for teachers to pursue. As a teacher, I was searching for a way, after 10 years of experience, to expand my part in the discussions about school policy and the direction of curriculum and teaching, but there was no career pathway that was different from moving into administration. So when I moved into school leadership, a key part of my commitment was to help redefine that, and that's what Opportunity Culture does."

So, in his first year, he and a team of teachers made plans to implement an Opportunity Culture the next fall, 2013–14, using the Multi-Classroom Leadership (MCL) model (see page 2). He and that team visited another school using the model, then worked fast to make the transition at Bailey.

"The first year was a pretty intense transition year—we went ahead and ripped the Band-Aid off," Sawyer says. Along the way, he says, he learned a lot about the leadership his multi-classroom leaders would need from him, to allow them to become great leaders of their teaching teams.

MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

In Opportunity Culture school models, a school extends the reach of its excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within its regular budget. At Bailey, Sawyer and a team of teachers and administrators chose to use the **Multi-Classroom Leadership** (MCL) model, in which an excellent teacher can stay in the classroom while leading a small teaching team, co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them. MCLs at Bailey generally spent about two-thirds of their time on instruction and one-third on leadership work, including data analysis and meetings with the team teachers. Bailey's teams include "aspiring teachers"—full-time, yearlong, paid student teachers who supported the teaching teams, while learning on the job. The multi-classroom leader receives much higher pay while taking full accountability for the results of all students taught by his or her team.

"When you build an Opportunity Culture, you need to have a support system laid out," Sawyer says. "What MCLs would need—that definitely was my education. I made a lot of mistakes in the beginning. We were so entrenched in operational planning and the transition to these new roles, I don't think I knew what I needed to know in the beginning. Oh, what I learned—about the importance of developing MCLs' trust in themselves as coaches, and their skill sets around coaching and developing other adults."

Top teachers in Tennessee wanted to work at Bailey under the new model, but when faced with leading teachers as well as students, "the toughest road they walked was 'I was so excellent as a teacher, and now I feel like I'm a first-year teacher again'," Sawyer says. "I related to the challenges after moving from teacher to assistant principal, but I didn't do enough support in the beginning."

But, he says, he and the MCLs learned quickly from one another. The MCLs became a team in which they all mentored one another, depending on each person's skills.

"That was a pivot for me as a leader, moving from the old-school model of the principal with 50 direct reports who is in charge of 'inspecting and improving' each of the 50 direct reports, to now being the leader among leaders, and you are networking their gifts, and even the principal is learning from their standout strengths."

And this team model of teacher-leadership worked: In 2014-15, Bailey received the highest schoolwide growth score possible under the state system, and the highest level of growth in the entire district in math in grades three through eight.

CHRISTIAN SAWYER'S KEYS TO LEADING A TEAM OF LEADERS

★ *Teach leadership:* Sawyer focused on individual, "touchstone" meetings every other week with each multi-classroom leader (MCL) to develop their skills in coaching and developing adults, team leadership, and data-driven instruction. He paired those with all-MCL leadership development sessions also held every other week. He also created a summer leadership and training institute just for Bailey MCLs, and a handbook for them spelling out the vision and systems—including the policies that backed up MCLs' authority.

★ *Use data to match teachers to students' needs:* The MCLs focused on analyzing student achievement results and changing instruction accordingly. The all-MCL development sessions included data analysis, and it was done in depth in the one-on-one MCL meetings and the meetings MCLs held at least weekly with their teams. After grouping students by their latest needs, the MCL would assign team teachers to the groups according to the teachers' skills in addressing those needs.

★ *Lead a cascade of leaders:* After the first implementation year, in which Sawyer developed—and learned from—his MCLs, he found that they were ready to mentor the school's new MCLs, as well as leading and developing their own teaching teams.

★ *Right-size teaching teams:* Sawyer and his MCLs found that in the first year, some MCLs were leading teams that were too big to suit Bailey's needs. In year 2 of implementation, they cut back to a maximum of five people led by an MCL.

★ *Choose—and evaluate—wisely:* Sawyer worked with the MCLs to choose and develop observation plans and rubrics for him to use in evaluating MCLs. After the first implementation year, he also had his MCLs take a lead role in hiring their teams, working with them to adapt Opportunity Culture hiring rubrics and interview questions to suit Bailey's needs.

TEACH LEADERSHIP

In the first Opportunity Culture year, Sawyer says, he was trying to use district resources, trainings, and materials to assist his MCLs with their team leadership. But those resources were developed for whole-school coaches, not Sawyer's MCL model of deeply embedded excellent instruction from and led by an excellent teacher-leader who focused on student achievement data. "They were well intentioned, but there was a fundamental disconnect between the district operation and the concept of the MCL."

Thus, in the second year, Sawyer created his own materials and training.

Most important, he found, were weekly one-on-one "touchstone" meetings with each of Bailey's eight MCLs (two for math, four for literacy, and two for science), which eventually moved to every other week. "Those touchstone meetings were so important, intended to probe and develop the key areas of coaching and developing others, data-driven instruction, and transformational team leadership."

Sawyer also created a summer leadership and training institute that he led just for Bailey, focusing on the Opportunity Culture vision and getting into systems details, such as the protocol for data meetings, and helping MCLs work out their own schedules to include team collaboration and planning time.

He created a handbook for MCLs, so they all had the same systems and vision, and started weekly all-MCL meetings on leadership development, which also eventually moved to every other week.

"If one of these was the key, it was the touchstone meetings, but paired with the system of networking of MCLs during the leadership development sessions," Sawyer says. "That was an effective combination."

As Bailey's Opportunity Culture evolved, Sawyer says, his one-on-one meetings with the MCLs changed. In the beginning, he created agendas that called for specific times to spend on items such as data analysis and feedback, but the MCLs gradually took over those agendas.

"Data-driven instruction, coaching and feedback, and transformational teaching were the three key areas for the teacher-leaders—they would come to the meeting and say what was effective, what needed to change, and what barriers they were facing that I could help conquer."

Sawyer also found that Bailey needed policies to back up the MCLs' authority. Their explicit authority is part of what distinguishes MCLs from the district's traditional coaching roles. "The MCL was more accountable for teaching and learning outcomes for specific classrooms, and we needed to give them tools and supports to accomplish these outcomes with their teams," Sawyer says.

"In the traditional model, the principal is manager, so when a teacher is, say, not submitting lesson plans, the principal steps in and is the arm of accountability. In this new model, MCLs are empowered to lead, but they need the ability to effect change when a team member is not performing," he says. "So I had to intentionally not step in—that had to be worked out through the team if they were going to maintain this effective leadership structure. So by the second year, we learned that we needed policies in place to empower MCLs to have those tough conversations while also maintaining camaraderie and rapport with their team."

For example, lesson plans were due on Monday mornings for MCLs to review, and the policy required them to inform the principal if there was a pattern of non-completion. "So the policy then takes it off the back of the MCL about 'ooh, do I have to tell or not?' It becomes just the expectation."

Through all of these methods, Sawyer saw his MCLs find their footing as leaders of adults as well as students. "One of my strongest MCLs was working through a team challenge, and came to me and said, 'What do I do?' I looked at her and said, 'My question to you is, what are *you* going to do?' That was a real moment for her and for me, because she realized she is the leader, and I wasn't going to give her answers. It was tough—she walked into the situation and completely turned it around, but it wasn't easy at first. That exemplified the shift for me that teachers really are the true leaders."

USE DATA TO MATCH TEACHERS TO STUDENTS' NEEDS

A focus on analyzing student achievement results was woven throughout everything MCLs did. Sawyer's one-on-one MCL meetings included the most in-depth analysis of each team's data and subsequent plans for instructional changes; when the MCLs met together for the leadership development meetings, they also regularly reviewed student results.

Then, MCLs met weekly—sometimes daily—with their teams to analyze and group student work. MCLs could then focus on reaching each student's needs according to the teachers' skills.

Sawyer points to one math team as an example of the effectiveness of this approach. The team met every Friday to analyze student work, separating the work piles according to how close the students were to mastering a specific objective.

"Together, the team then designed highly specific plans for the upcoming week, with targeted differentiation for the different groupings of students. Then, [the MCL] led the team in dividing up who would teach the differentiated approaches to the different groups of students, based on the unique skills of those on her team," Sawyer says. "That was the beauty of it! She began tailoring differentiated planning not just to the needs of the students, but to the unique skills of her team members."

LEAD A CASCADE OF LEADERS

In year 2, with several new MCLs at Bailey, "those who had been with me from the beginning really stepped up as mentors for the new MCLs. That network and community among the MCLs was so powerful, and they started to see their differentiated strengths. Not every player on the team had to have brilliant aspects of the game. We had to figure out who's good at different parts of the game and learn from them and rely on them. We had some who were standouts at data-driven instruction, or others who were true leaders at leading other adults. We had to create an internal network with the MCL team."

Sawyer also learned that he needed to build a team of support around the MCLs beyond the help he could offer them—both in being teacher-leaders and in maintaining their resilience through the intense work of turning a school around.

He layered in additional MCLs, one for academic support, who focused on the literacy MCLs, and another for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). They met weekly with Sawyer and the school's chief of school culture to focus on data and determine what support the MCLs needed, and helped lead the MCL development sessions. "I had to have a team to support the MCLs; I couldn't do it all alone," he says. "If an MCL failed, our scholars failed."

These two MCLs taught less often (teaching individual classes or student groups as needed), and the STEM MCL also led the electives teachers, even though they were not formally included in the MCL model. Their "creative and passionate support" of the MCLs helped demonstrate a deep commitment to the MCL model, Sawyer says.

In year 2, Sawyer also saw that he needed to work on creating a close relationship between the MCLs and the deans of students, who did not teach but who oversaw school culture. The deans organized supports for students and developed teachers in classroom management skills.

"This has to be done in the organizational design of the school," he says, "specifically building ways to bring the deans and chief of school culture together with the MCLs for regular dialogue and collaboration."

Sawyer held individual, "touchstone" meetings every other week with each MCL, paired with all-MCL leadership development sessions also held every other week.

RIGHT-SIZE THE SUPPORT

A school turnaround often begins with tight principal control, Sawyer says, and that was true early in year one. But as they moved into the second year, systems were in place to distribute leadership and support for teachers. These included the regular meetings Sawyer held individually with MCLs, so that the MCLs were leading and seeing what needed to change to support their teams. Bailey also made substantial revisions to how they guided the school's "aspiring teachers"—full-time, yearlong, paid student teachers who supported the teaching teams, while learning on the job.

The MCLs and Sawyer also realized that they needed to right-size the teams themselves to provide solid support.

"Between year 1 and 2, we went to Harvard for a transformational teaming institute, where we had the big epiphany that teams should be no bigger than four or five people max under an MCL—and we had teams that were 10, 12, 15. So we made significant revisions in year 2 to focus their leadership, and the results of year 2 spoke for themselves—by year 2 there was a jump forward."

That smaller size helped Sawyer as he kept trying to sharpen his priorities for the MCLs, focusing on co-teaching and instructional small groups. Secondary to that were coaching and developing others: "Our top need was an excellent teacher delivering instruction to more students, then the second part was developing teachers. So, if you have a bigger team, then naturally you're delivering excellent instruction to more students—but if you're not careful, you move back to the old coaching model with too many teachers being coached."

CHOOSE—AND EVALUATE—WISELY

Sawyer was confident that he had chosen his MCLs well; by year 2, he wanted them to take a lead role in hiring their teams.

"We developed a hiring rubric and interview questions, and they became the chief recruiters and hiring captains for any open posi-

MISSION CHANGES CULTURE

Having a common mission and vision among the MCLs of commitment to reaching the most underserved students in the city "was the candle that kept burning through all the storms."

"The mission can be tiring, but the mission never tires, and that's what sustained all of us," Sawyer says. "And we sustained each other—when one person was facing tough times, others circled around them and supported them—that's what really evolved in this Opportunity Culture. It's important that the word 'culture' was in that, because culture was the key."

tions. They became the initial front line on hiring," Sawyer says. "It was so powerful to see the type of talent they recruited, and they took ownership of it because they were going to be on their teams."

Sawyer and the MCLs also developed an observation model for him to use with them in evaluating their progress. Given the priority of having each MCL deliver and obtain excellent teaching and learning, he chose to observe the MCLs' instructional work, such as co-teaching with a team teacher or working with small instructional groups, as the primary basis for their evaluation; feedback on how they led meetings with their team and on their coaching was secondary.

He had two rubrics for evaluation to choose from—a school support rubric that looks at items such as coaching teachers and supporting students in need, and another from the state evaluation model that focuses on the work of the teacher. He chose the state model as the closest fit even though it was still designed for one-teacher-one-classroom models.

"The primary work of the MCLs was rich teaching and learning every day. That was a decided shift against coaching, because all of the district coaches were evaluated on the support services rubric. ... If this is about keeping and maintaining top teachers in the classroom, this is crucial."

In the end, Sawyer says, it all comes down to solid support—for everyone.

"A good challenge to have was I realized with this infusion of incredible talent into the leadership team, I had to be ready to run forward with this team," he says. "They were eager and ready to grow, so I had to step up my game to be sure they were growing and flourishing. This model forces us to look at rich growth and development for our highest performers, and that was an important shift for me, not just the usual focus on struggling teachers. These are high-achievers; they do not want to fail—that's what makes them the leaders that they are—but they need to be supported so they don't burn out."

Watch: A short video accompanies this vignette series on Opportunity Culture principals, featuring Michelle McVicker, Alison Harris Welcher, and Christian Sawyer.

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